DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 399 118 RC 020 707

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TITLE State Associations of Rural and Small Schools: Missions, Operations, and Services.
INSTITUTION Appalachia Educational Lab., Charleston, W. Va.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 2 Aug 96
CONTRACT RJ96006001
NOTE 14p.; Paper prepared for the First Annual Conference of Virginia Rural Superintendents (Mountain Lake Resort, VA, August 1996).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Tests/Evaluation Instruments (160)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Advocacy; Elementary Secondary Education; Networks; Organizational Objectives; *Professional Associations; Rural Education; *Rural Schools; *School Districts; Surveys
IDENTIFIERS *State Associations

ABSTRACT

A survey examined the mission, operation, and services of statewide formal networks addressing the concerns of rural school systems. Of 21 known state rural education associations, responses were received from 10: Arizona, California, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, Nevada, New York, Ohio, and Texas. Respondents indicated that, in general, the mission of state rural education associations is to give identity, voice, and exposure to rural schools and communities through legislative advocacy, professional development, leadership, research, and collaboration with other groups. Eligibility for membership was extended to various combinations of the following: schools, school districts, individuals, colleges, businesses, and representatives of geographic regions. Membership ranged from 12 in Missouri to 4,700 in Texas, but the membership of 7 of the 10 organizations fell in the range of 101-563. Association budgets ranged from $8,000 to $375,000, with a mean of $136,450 and a median of $73,750. Funds were received primarily from membership dues and were used to pay for conferences, workshops, paid employees, program speakers, networking costs, and publication costs. Most associations had two paid employees. Association activities are concerned primarily with educating legislators, members, and communities about the educational needs and concerns of their state's rural sector. Common difficulties include maintaining member involvement, presenting a unified research-based voice on rural issues, and overcoming challenges of distance. Includes a list of 21 rural education associations and the survey questionnaire. (SV)

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State Associations of Rural and Small Schools: Missions, Operations, and Services

by
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Research Intern

Prepared for the First Annual
Virginia Rural Superintendents Conference
Mountain Lake Resort, VA

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August 2, 1996

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RC 020707

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INTRODUCTION

Rural educators nationwide are faced with a variety of issues and dilemmas distinct from those of their urban and suburban neighbors. The desire to share information on these common concerns has led to the formation of formal and informal networks of educators representing school districts, individual schools, teachers, business people, higher education institutions, and other organizations involved in the education of rural populations. Virginia is holding its first Rural School Superintendents Conference in August and asked AEL, because of its expertise in rural education, to make a presentation that would stimulate ideas for establishing an informal network of rural superintendents. In collaboration with conference planners, AEL conducted an applied research activity to identify possible ideas to be shared with the Virginia superintendents.

APPLIED RESEARCH ACTIVITY

An applied research activity generated information about the mission, operation, and services of state-wide formal networks addressing the concerns of rural school systems. The questionnaire, used for data collection, was not intended to obtain detailed information, but rather to serve as a descriptive tool, allowing the researcher to extract a prototype of a state rural schools association. This information is useful to rural educators wanting to better understand the national network of state rural education associations or interested in establishing a formal or informal rural education network.

Twenty-one state rural school associations were selected from the Rural Education Directory, published by AEL's ERIC/CRESS, to receive a questionnaire. Nineteen associations received the questionnaire and AEL subsequently received 10 usable responses

(see Appendix A for a list of associations). Because the study was conducted in mid-summer, this high response rate is suggestive of the organizations' interest in facilitating networking among those involved in rural education. In addition to the questionnaire, many respondents included publications such as newsletters, by-laws, and brochures to which they referred for answering particular items of the questionnaire.

RESULTS

The questionnaire is composed of the following six sections: Mission Statement, Membership and Staff, Funding and Expenses, Activities, Problems and Difficulties, and Contacts and Sources of Assistance. The last five sections are divided into a total of 17 numbered items each addressing a particular issue or component of its section (see Appendix B for a copy of the questionnaire). Information from each section is synthesized in the following paragraphs.

Mission

In general the mission of state rural education associations, as delineated in responses, is to give identity, voice, and exposure to the particular quality of rural schools and communities. Through legislative advocacy, professional development, leadership, research, and collaboration with other groups, these associations strive to strengthen rural education in their states.

Membership and Staff

A majority of respondents identify school districts as part of their membership pool with a few of respondents reporting only districts as eligible for membership. In addition,

respondents cite individual schools, superintendents (often representing districts), teachers, business members, colleges and universities, and concerned individuals as members. The number of members ranges from 12 in Missouri (where a representative from each of the nine geographic regions plus 2 school board members and 1 university staff composes the association board) to over 4,700 in Texas (where 701 districts participate along with 4,000 individuals). However, excluding the outliers of Texas, Missouri and Nevada, the trimmed range of 101 to 563, is probably a more representative figure. Table 1 summarizes responses to the five items in this section; the mean and median values reported were calculated using the trimmed range (i.e., 101-563).

Table 1
Eligibility, Membership, and Dues by State Association

State	Item 1: Eligibility	Item 2: Members	Item 3: Dues
Arizona	sch., dist., indiv., co. offices, colleges, busi.	195	$35
California	super., busi.	563	$100-750
Kansas	dist., sch. board	105	$300
Minnesota	dist., associate memb.	150 (dist.), 20 assc. memb.	$1150-2250
Missouri	rep. from 9 geo. reg., 2 sch. board memb., 1 univ. staff	12	$200
Montana	dist.	101	.001% of gener. fund
Nevada	dist. (repr. by super.)	15	-yes-
New York	sch. dist., BOCES dist., rur. organ.	300+	$400
Ohio	dist. (repr. by super.)	101	$250
Texas	dist., indiv.	701 (dist.), 4000 (indiv.)	$60 (profess.) $30 (indiv.)

Note. mean members = 219; median members = 195.

On average state associations report about two persons on the payroll, including both full and part-time staff. In many cases, the executive director and one office staff are the only paid employees.

Funding

Budget size appears to be positively correlated with the size of the organization and ranges from $8,000 to $375,000 (n=10). The average budget is approximately $136,450, considerably higher than the median amount of $73,750 because of the cluster of California, Texas, and Minnesota around the $300,000 mark (see Table 2). Membership dues are the unanimous primary source of revenue for the associations. Other sources mentioned include fees from the sale of bonds, annual conference fees, workshops, and funds contributed by higher education institutions. Funds are used to offset the costs of conferences and workshops; to provide salaries for directors, program speakers, policy analysts, board members, and office assistants; to pay for networking costs including travel, meetings, and distance communication; to publish materials; and to cover a variety of other operational costs.

Table 2
Rural Education Association Budgets by State

State	AZ	CA	KS	MN	MO	MT	NV	NY	OH	TX
Budget (in thousands)	$8	$287	$32	$300	$40	$90	$35	$140	$55-60	$375

Activities

This section is subdivided into the following five parts, each presented as an

individual item: number of meetings, political activity, services, publications, and other. Responses to these items reveal the character of the organizations. All actively participate in educating members, legislators, and communities about the educational needs and concerns of the rural sector in their state. In addition to at least one annual membership meeting, respondents report frequent meetings of their boards of directors. Associations with large constituencies and memberships tend to focus energies toward a single membership meeting per year and a series of monthly or bi-monthly board meetings while smaller associations are able to conduct membership meetings more regularly.

Half of respondents define their political activity as lobbying for legislative action towards the betterment of rural schools. Several report, however, that lobbying is an illegal activity for them. In these cases, respondents emphasize their commitment to keeping politicians informed about the concerns of their membership. Such education entails personal contact, inviting politicians to speak at meetings, and visiting legislators to discuss issues important to rural communities.

Besides advocacy at the state level, responding associations describe a medley of activities undertaken to inform members, schools, businesses, and interested individuals. While an exhaustive list would not be practical, Table 3 provides a listing of the principal activities characterizing the state rural association enterprise. Nine out of 10 respondents reported publishing a newsletter anywhere from 4 to 12 times a year. Several also produce brochures for recruiting new members or bulletins and policy summaries to keep members updated on a regular basis about board activities and legislative actions.

Table 3
Principal Activities of State Rural Education Associations

+ conferences for teachers, admin., and membership	+ scholarships
+ workshops for board members and member schools	+ distance learning network
+ staff development training sessions	+ recognition of rural teachers and administrators
+ research and development	+ superintendent search
+ policy analysis	+ publications
+ legal service to school boards	+ resolving regional conflicts
+ seminars on timely issues	+ chairing public meetings
+ management services	+ networking with state educ. depart. personnel
+ grant writing assistance	+ conducting surveys
+ collaboration with other agencies	+ insurance coverage

Difficulties

Respondents identify several sources of persistent difficulties for their associations. Many organizations had difficulty early in their history developing and maintaining a membership base to generate needed revenue and carry out activities. A related challenge for mature organizations is members' involvement in other organizations; competing commitments limit participation at rural association meetings and conferences. However, some respondents relate that once the "static inertia" is overcome, in part through charismatic leadership, maintaining membership is no longer an obstacle.

Another recurrent theme in responses to this section is the difficulty in preserving a unified voice on issues related to rural education. In order to be regarded seriously, that voice must be rooted in research and data analysis, one respondent warns, instead of emotional arguments. Rural associations, according to respondents, must monitor political developments in order to assure that the concerns they raise do not needlessly offend

statewide organizations representing all school districts. Opposition from organizations controlled by large schools is always a threat if issues are not approached carefully.

Distance creates a universal set of challenges for respondents. Operational costs are comparatively high, bringing together existing organizations and networks is more difficult, and the time and energy necessary to educate the public about rural school concerns is great. However, as telecommunication services are deployed in rural areas, these hindrances are reportedly being met more successfully.

Sources of Assistance

Eight associations are affiliated with the National Rural Education Association (NREA). Membership benefits include the NREA journal and newsletter, the annual convention, and a formal national network for sharing current issues and practices in rural education. Several respondents report exchanging newsletters and membership services information with other NREA affiliate groups; however, this appears to be the extent of inter-associational contact. A small number maintain close contact with Regional Educational Laboratories with one respondent praising laboratory research as a "helpful extension to our work." The survey indicates that state associations do not benefit much from organizations outside their region. This is due, in part, to the time and money constraints many associations face. Responses suggest, however, that many hope to expand this contact in the near future.

SUMMARY REMARKS

As one respondent adroitly characterizes the enterprise, "Organizations of this type

are fluid and people driven...you must maintain contact with area leaders, build trust, react to the needs of the field, stay current, leap tall buildings in a single bound, and enjoy yourself and your colleagues." These associations accomplish similar missions, often with limited resources, by engaging in a variety of activities made possible through a strong networking system of educators throughout their states.

Appendix A
State Associations of Rural and Small Schools

Arizona Small and Rural School Districts Association
contact: Harold Porter
phone: 602/252-0361

*Arizona Small and Rural Schools Association
contact: Guillero Zamudio
phone: NA

Arkansas Rural Education Association
contact: Charlotte Right
phone: 501/684-2253

*California Small School Districts' Association
contact: Dave Walrath
phone: 916/441-3300

Association of Illinios Rural & Small Schools
contact: Robert Hall
phone: 309/298-2961

Rural Schools of Iowa, Inc.
contact: Stan Jensen
phone: 515/283-2625

*Schools for Quality Education, Inc.
contact: Barbara Havlicek
phone: 913/532-5886

Michigan Rural Eduction Association
contact: James Mapes
phone: 616/674-8091

*Minnesota Rural Education Association
contact: Vernae Hasbargen
phone: 612/762-6574

*Missouri Association of Rural Education
contact: Ray Doerhoff
phone: 314/493-2373

*Montana Rural Education Association
contact: Don Waldren
phone: 406/443-2629

Nebraska Rural Community Schools Association
contact: Gary Fisher
phone: 308/938-3825

*Nevada Rural School District Alliance
contact: Judith Williams
phone: 702/784-1107

*Rural Schools Program of New York
contact: Michael Joseph, Jr.
phone: 607/255-7905

North Dakota Small Organized Schools
contact: Patricia Lauback
phone: 701/328-4770

*Coalition for Rural/Appalachia Schools
contact: William Inman
phone: 614/593-4414

Oregon Small Schools Association
contact: Bill Hilton
phone: 503/435-1704

South Carolina Association for Rural Education
contact: Fletcher Pierce
phone: 864/465-2898

*Texas Association of Community Schools
contact: Don Rogers
phone: 512/474-1167

Texas Rural Education Association
contact: John Moss, George Brown
phone: 903/572-9251

Utah Rural Schools Association
contact: Jan Clayburn
phone: 801/538-7892

("*" indicates respondents)

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Appendix B
State Associations of Rural and Small Schools Questionniare

Name/Address of Association:

MISSION STATEMENT

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

year of founding _____

MEMBERSHIP/STAFF:

1. Who? (schools / districts / superintendents) _____

_____

2. How many members? _____
3. How are members selected? _____

_____

4. Are there membership dues? yes / no If yes: $ _____
5. How many staff members are on the payroll? full time: _____ part time: _____

FUNDING/EXPENSES:

6. Estimate your annual budget size: $ _____
7. What is your primary source of revenue? _____
8. Describe, in as much detail as possible, how funds are allocated: _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

ACTIVITIES:

9. How often do you hold meetings? _____
10. Describe the nature of your political involvement (lobbying, etc.): _____

_____

_____

_____

11. List the services you provide (include a brief description when necessary): _____

12. Do you publish newsletters, articles, etc.? (please describe) _____

13. Describe any other activities or projects that you deem important: _____

PROBLEMS/DIFFICULTIES:

14. Comment on the nature of problems faced when establishing the organization: _____

15. Discuss any other difficulties your organization has faced in the past or is currently facing: _____

CONTACTS/SOURCES OF ASSISTANCE:

16. Are you affiliated with any national organizations? (NREA, etc.) _____

17. Do you maintain contact with rural education centers, other state associations of rural and small schools, regional education laboratories, etc? (please explain the nature of this contact) _____

I would like to receive a copy of the results of this study. ☐